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REPORTS & NEWS

Society for Hindu-Christian Studies News

2001 Annual General Meeting

The 2001 Annual General Meeting of the Society for Hindu-Christian Studies will be held at the American Academy of Religion / Society of Biblical Literature 2001 Annual Meeting in Denver, Colorado.

Friday, 16 November 2001

7:30 – 9:30 p.m.

A screening and discussion of the film "Poverty, Politics and Religion" (32 minutes, condensed and renamed version of "Fishers of Men," produced by Ranjan Kamath and Padmavati Rao, 1997). A treatment of tribal Christians in Madhya Pradesh and the attempts of some Hindus to encourage them to return to their Hindu roots.

The film will be followed by comments from four panellists, and then audience discussion.

Panellists: **Arti Dhand**, University of Toronto; **James Lochtefeld**, Carthage College; **Selva Raj**, Albion College; **Mat Schmalz**, Holy Cross.

Moderator: **Frank Clooney**, Boston College.

Saturday, 17 November 2001

9:00 – 11:00 a.m. [Location TBA, see AAR/SBL Program]

Panel Discussion. Theme: "Hindu Readings of a Christian Classic." A few years ago we had a panel on which a number of members read Siva Jnana Bodham and discussed what they found, questioned, explored in the text. This panel is the twin to that panel, as now we have scholars who are Hindus reading a Christian classic, in order to discuss what they find, explore and

question as they read it in light of the expectations and vocabulary of Hindu traditions.

Panellists: **Deepak Sarma**, Salisbury State University; **Parimal Patil**, Emory University; **Pravrajika Vrajaprana**, Vedanta Society.

Presider and Initiator of Discussion: **Brian Pennington**, Maryville College.

Text: St. Bonaventure's medieval class, *The Journey of the Mind to God*, which is available in numerous translations but can be found on the web too, e.g., at: <http://www.ccel.org/b/bonaventure/journey/journey.html>.

10:45 a.m.: Annual Business Meeting

Both sessions and the business meeting are open to all who may be interested. For further information, contact Kay Jordan, Society Secretary at kjordan@runet.edu, or visit the Society's website (<http://www.acusd.edu/theo/hcs-1>).

2000 Annual General Meeting

Report from Francis X. Clooney, SJ, Panel Organizer, on the Panel Presentation at the Annual General Meeting, Nashville TN, November 18, 2000.

Panelists were:

Edwin Bryant, who provided context and interpretation of the worship of images in the Hindu tradition, and also observations on the centuries-old dispute between Hindus and Christians over "idolatry"; Daniel Sheridan, who explored attitudes and resources in the Roman Catholic theological tradition which would serve well in

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constructing new and positive reflection on worship and the theology of deities such as Krishna in light of Christian theology; and Diana Eck, who provided a range of observations on the contemporary and current worship of images in the Hindu traditions, in America too, and on the heated, tense context of disputes in India which must affect our 'cool' theological discussions.

[The 4th panelist, Dr. N.S.R.K. Ravi of the Southern Baptist Convention - which published the Diwali pamphlet which originally prompted our interest in having such a panel - was unfortunately ill, and at the last moment was unable to attend the panel. In his absence, I began the panel with a overview of the Diwali pamphlet, its attitudes and practical purposes.]

In my brief response to the panel papers, I made points such as these:

1. These papers remind us of the complexity of the history of Hindu-Christian interactions on image worship, and the complexity of the religious issues, theoretical and practical, involved in both the worship of images and the effort to assess that worship from outside the traditions involved. Neither the practices nor the religious views/judgments involved are simple or one-sided.

2. Much of the work of reconciliation, as an antidote to the history of misunderstanding, needs to be done in the various communities of Hindus and Christians where the issue is most strongly felt, and the serenity of scholarly study must be contextualized in light of the strong feelings people have on such issues,

3. But a scholarly organization can do a service by panels such as this, where the papers have clearly outlined key factors for consideration.

4. In particular, the panel reminds us:

- a) to keep and retrieve historical memory, putting current debates in the context of issues reaching back for centuries;

- b) to present clearly and fairly the 'insider' perspectives in the Hindu and Christian traditions on image worship and

idolatry, so that it becomes more difficult to level or caricature the beliefs of others;

- c) to help distinguish among i) practices, ii) beliefs about practices, iii) sophisticated theological interpretations, iv) more ad hoc views which arise in particular moments of dialogue or conflict;

- d) to offer constructive suggestions as to how the communities involved might move toward deeper mutual respect and understanding. Edwin Bryant puts forward some quite interesting points regarding Bhaktivinoda Thakur's understanding of image worship and divine embodiment in images - points which can be taken up seriously by Christian theologians.

Daniel Sheridan put forward an intriguing theology of the reality of spiritual beings in the Christian context, and asked whether a more complex understanding of the multiplicity of spiritual beings might aid Christian theologians in finding room in their theologizing for the realities of the worship of Krishna, for instance. He noted how Christians have traditionally understood different kinds of worship of images (such as *dulia* and *latria*) that should be brought to bear in a more complex reflection on the worship of images; Some questions generated by the papers:

- a) Is there really common ground, regarding theory and practice, between the Catholic sacramental theology and Hindu worship of images?

- b) Is it useful to request Hindu and Christian scholars to look again at heated/vexed terms such as idolatry - or paganism or demons or proselytization - or is it better to move on and not use such terms?

- c) How in practice can scholars connect these kinds of discussions back to their communities, such that various groups such as the Southern Baptist Convention would hear useful reflections regarding the Diwali pamphlet?

- d) Is there a larger project here, e.g., a cooperative book-length study on how images have been understood and religiously treated in the Hindu and Christian traditions, the history of the

concept of Christian/missionary concept of idolatry, and the history of the Christian-Hindu interaction on the topic?

This unofficial and partial report is only my recollection of some key points - so I urge others who participated in the panel

and discussion to add their own comments on our conversation and possible follow-ups.

And thanks again to Diana Eck, Edwin Bryant, and Dan Sheridan for making this excellent event possible!